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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pichler, C. (2013). A Buddhist way of drug rehabilitation in Thailand - approaching drug addiction with loving kindness: an interview with Phra Maha Narong Chaiyatha. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(1), 195-201.
<https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-6.1-12>

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A Buddhist Way of Drug Rehabilitation in Thailand - Approaching Drug Addiction With Loving Kindness: An Interview With Phra Maha Narong Chaiyatha

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Citation Pichler, C. (2013). A buddhist way of drug rehabilitation in Thailand - Approaching drug addiction with loving kindness: An Interview with Phra Maha Narong Chaiyatha. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(1), 195-201.

Narong Chaiyatha has worked at the Quality Development of Life Center for 12 years and is engaged in diverse social projects as a Buddhist monk. The Quality Development of Life Center is an alternative program of dealing with drug addiction in Thailand and was established in 1993. On the premises of a Buddhist temple, the participants live together with monks, practice meditation, join chanting and dhamma talks, and help cultivate the temple. The program is part of the implementation of restorative justice in the criminal justice system. Depending on the severity of the drug addiction and the social background of the person, the Department of Probation of the Ministry of Justice sends clients to the center to take part in the Buddhist rehabilitation program for two months. This interview is based on the experiences of Narong Chaiyatha at the Quality Development of Life Center in Thep Mongkol temple, Amnat Charoen, Thailand, and gives an overview of some of the central elements of the program, positive impacts for the community as well as challenges in its implementation. The interview was conducted at the same location on 28 January 2013.

Narong Chaiyatha arbeitete 12 Jahre im Zentrum Quality Development of Life und engagiert sich als buddhistischer Mönch in diversen sozialen Projekten. Das Zentrum Quality Development of Life stellt ein alternatives Programm zur Behandlung von Drogensucht in Thailand dar und wurde im Jahr 1993 gegründet. Auf dem Gelände eines buddhistischen Tempels leben die TeilnehmerInnen zusammen mit Mönchen, praktizieren Meditation, nehmen an Gesängen und Dhamma-Gesprächen teil und helfen, den Tempel instand zu halten. Das Programm ist Teil der Implementierung von restorative justice im Kriminal- und Justizsystem. Je nach Schweregrad der Drogenabhängigkeit und sozialer Herkunft der Personen, schickt die Abteilung für Bewährung des Justizministeriums KlientInnen zum Zentrum, um an dem buddhistischen Rehabilitationsprogramm für die Dauer von zwei Monaten teilzunehmen. Das folgende Interview basiert auf den Erfahrungen von Narong Chaiyatha am Zentrum im Thep Mongkol Tempel, Amnat Charoen, Thailand, und bietet einen Überblick über zentrale Elemente des Programms, positive Auswirkungen für die Gemeinschaft sowie Herausforderungen im Rahmen der Implementierung. Das Interview wurde am gleichen Ort am 28. Jänner 2013 durchgeführt.

1 Carina Pichler is studying International Development Studies at the University of Vienna. Currently she is working on her Diploma thesis about restorative justice and potential inspirations from Buddhist ideas. During her stay in Thailand in 2012/2013 she conducted several interviews with Buddhist monks and restorative justice advocates. Contact: pichler.carina@gmail.com

CARINA PICHLER: In the beginning, I would like to know how you understand Buddhism and what it means to you in your life.

NARONG CHAIYATHA: I see Buddhism as a way of life, a Buddhist lifestyle. I was born in a poor family with seven siblings and there was not enough money to pay for school and education. My father died when I was four years old. That made the situation in the family very difficult; my mother had to take care of all children without him. I went to the Buddhist temple to stay there and ordained as novice when I was 13 years old. I was surrounded by a good loving environment and many opportunities evolved for me through living as monk; aside from studying the Buddha teachings I could learn a lot about other traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism as well. I had the opportunity to visit higher education institutions; obtained a Bachelor and a Master degree and am now working on my PhD thesis. If I had not ordained, it would have hardly been possible for me to study considering my family background. I want to study and practice more and support other people to live a happy life.

I felt a lot of support from society and want to give something back. Through studying the Buddha teachings I have gained benefits for myself; happiness, confidence, and more abilities to support society in various ways. It is difficult for me to explain the meaning of Buddhism for my life in only a few words. Many opportunities had opened up to me: associating with good teachers, living in the forest temple close to nature, covering my basic needs, studying and practicing the Buddha teachings, studying abroad, taking part in diverse trainings, meeting many interesting people, etc.

PICHLER: You are currently working on your PhD thesis about the role of meditation in drug rehabilitation treatment in Thailand. At the *Quality Development of Life Center* you worked together with the participants of the Buddhist drug rehabilitation program for 12 years. How can meditation help to deal with drug addiction?

CHAIYATHA: I think that meditation is only one aspect. The Buddhist way of rehabilitation is not only about practicing meditation alone, but also about applying morality (*Sila*), concentration (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*Panna*). Those factors cannot be separated from meditation practice and they are applied into the rehabilitation method of the center. The value of meditation is to strengthen the ability to focus on one thing such as the mind or breathing. This concentration helps to gain happiness. The fruits or result of meditation practice is happiness. Happiness can't be gained by taking drugs; it is rather the opposite of drug abuse. The kind of happiness that is produced through drug abuse is not pure. Drugs can have different effects such as keeping you awake. Happiness that can be gained through meditation practice is much greater, because it comes from inside and not from outside.

I would like to share a metaphor in relation to that: If you look into calm water you can see yourself like in a mirror. If the foundation is not stable you can't see yourself. Through *Samadhi* (concentration or meditation) you are able to see the real problem. This ability leads to wisdom. Wisdom is the power to realise the truth of things. A stable mind is the condition for it.

PICHLER: Can you tell me a bit about your experience of working with the participants?

CHAIYATHA: It was a great experience and I feel very grateful. Only a few monks were working at this project. I did many activities with the participants; morning and evening chanting, Dhamma teachings, socialising with community members, exchanging and discussing the project with the community leaders, etc. Many different people from many different fields of society come together at the center and work as a team.

I spent a lot of time and energy and gained a lot for myself as well. Seeing the participants returning to society as good people gives me happiness, even now. Many of the former participants are now studying at higher education institutions, whereas others are working as officials at the police or with the government; in positions where they can serve society. Some of these ex-addicts have ordained as monks and are now living and working at the temple helping others, or have re-entered society, some even rising to become abbots.

The aim of the program is to find out more about what can be contributed from the Buddhist field for helping people in rehabilitating themselves from drug addiction. There were many positive experiences and many participants are abstaining from drugs since being trained at the temple. Many of them transformed their behavior and are now serving society. But I also experienced negative things: Some people were behaving badly and wanted to do harm. Usually we could solve the problems through working together as a team, but sometimes I tried to help, but it wasn't possible. It made me very sad and I even cried. I saw that the problem was mental and it was beyond my ability to help. Sometimes even the abbot or senior monk couldn't help to deal with the problem and if there was no other way, we had to contact a doctor who came and admitted the participant into a hospital for mental illness. Sometimes we had to do this, but not often. In these instances, the responsibility for these people will revert to the probation service and their own families.

I want to mention another positive example of a transformative impact that Buddhist activities can have on people who came into conflict with the law: I used to visit a prison to do meditation with the prisoners. One of the former prisoners now regularly joins in temple activities, works as taxi driver, and has a good relationship with us. Indeed, this person has become a role model and has worked as a volunteer with newcomers for the past three years, encouraging them to take a full part in the program. That is the result of meditation and Buddhist practices. At the Quality Development of Life Center I was working together closely with the participants, learned to understand emotions, and gained a lot for my personal training through the years. Helping others and thereby gaining happiness – I think this is the value of life. We are born into the society to do something good for ourselves and others as well. That is my understanding of the purpose of being born in this world. Through the drug rehabilitation program I got in contact with different people, worked together with good teachers in a good environment. I gained a lot of experiences through that and am now confident enough to work internationally. I already had the opportunity to give a speech at a World Conference to introduce the Buddhist drug rehabilitation center and discuss the issue of drug addiction.²

² The 21st World Conference of the World Federation of Therapeutic Communities was held in Melbourne in 2002.

PICHLER: What do you think are the most valuable benefits that the participants can gain at the center?

CHAIYATHA: One of the most valuable aspects is social reintegration. When the participants come to the temple they usually are supported by their families. The community – even the public – supports and respects them, because getting trained in the temple is appreciated throughout Thai society. The participants can associate with good persons, live in a good environment, and are offered good teachings. They can learn and grow in a supportive environment through activities such as chanting and meditation. Meditation is like ‘power giving’; it makes them mentally strong. They have the opportunity to cultivate loving kindness for themselves and for others as well. The individual’s gains can be to realize the truth of life, understand what is good and bad, and right and wrong; *Samadhi* supports this understanding. After having spent 60 days at the center they can be a good example for the society. It benefits both the individual and the public.

PICHLER: How would you describe the involvement and benefits for the community?

CHAIYATHA: The participants enter the rehabilitation program as humans; without being labeled as drug addicts or criminals. Through their training in our program they can gain both physical and mental strength. They help to develop the temple through work such as cultivating the garden, maintaining the facilities, help building residences. These activities benefit the temple – which means it also serves the community. The participants can be proud and happy because they created something for the community. Society appreciates and respects them for their activities. The benefits relate to society as a whole.

We are using an alternative way where participation is an essential part: We include the society; inform them about and invite them to take part in shared activities such as practicing yoga, walking in the forest, excursions, or providing opportunities for counseling sessions. All of these activities can be applied to the rehabilitation methodology, as can contact with all levels of society. After completing their stay, the former participants can serve as good example for society. They can support their families and other people. Some set up different activities such as group sports. It’s not always like that, some get addicted to drugs again. Meditation and Buddhist activities are not the only curing factors for rehabilitation; it also strongly depends on the environment and the person. The role of the monks is to help and support them; to give loving kindness. That is a main aim of the program: to provide a space and framework for cultivating loving kindness for oneself and society. I want to mention that there is no money or profit making through the program. I like to express my appreciation for the financial support for the maintenance of the temple from the government and people in the society.

PICHLER: What are your experiences with conflict dealing during the rehabilitation program?

CHAIYATHA: Every day there is a circle meeting with the participants and the monks where everyone can speak about their feelings and emotions. There we can observe and analyze problems. We use the power of the group. People can share their understandings and perspectives of the problem in the group and we try to find a solution together. If we can't find a solution in the group, we do individual counseling together with the abbot and senior monk or someone who has the ability to help in the matter. Sometimes we invite family members and relatives to participate and discuss the conflict together. If the participants continue to break the rules we have to send them home.

In the beginning my mind and emotions were unstable and sometimes I felt very happy, but sometimes I suffered a lot. Through working there for many years and training myself, my mind got more stable. The abbot of the temple, who is a great teacher to me, reminded me that there is no reason to suffer, because we are here to support them. I want to mention the concept of dependent origination. It says that everything depends on another and everything is conditioned: A leads to B and B leads to C. It helps to understand that the situation is like that because of karma. All is linked with each other. I learned to apply Buddhist teachings to understand this interrelatedness in the practical situations.

The staff needs to be well trained in order to successfully and professionally work with the participants. Working as a team is very important. The team working in the program – monks, community members, and the chiefs of the community – was trained at the hospital before working at the center. The form of training has been determined by the government and it takes place at the Thanyarak Hospital in Bangkok. There is also the *New Life Center* (Christian) where we learn about diversity. Generally, it is important to use methods that can be flexibly applied according to the needs of the people in the specific situations and contexts.

PICHLER: What is your personal impression of the success of the program?

CHAIYATHA: In my opinion the program has mainly been a success. There are many successful cases, but there are also some less successful cases: Some of the participants started using drugs again after going back to their homes. Sometimes they get in conflict with the law again and the Department of Probation sends them to another program, for example to a military camp to train in discipline. Compared to the Buddhist rehabilitation program at the temple, the military camp is very different in its approach. However, we all work together; sometimes monks go to the military camp and give dhamma talks. The abbot of Thap Mongkol temple set up an organization under which different social projects were established; such as a school, a kindergarten, a museum, and the Quality Development of Life Center³. Community participation is an important aspect of all the projects. There is a range of social

³ The center was relocated from Thap Mongkol temple to Bankaobo temple in Amnat Charoen, where the program is currently conducted.

activities with the aim of providing supportive social structures that prevent problems like drug addiction to a certain extent beforehand.

There are many examples of former drug addicts that contribute to society in good ways after leaving the Buddhist drug rehabilitation center. The aim is to enable the participants to return to society as good persons and good members of society. Social reintegration serves the former drug addicts, the community members, harmony in society, and prevents future problems. Drugs are a big issue in Thailand and the society uses a lot of money to address the problem. Especially North-East Thailand is affected, because drugs are smuggled in from the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia. Alcohol is a big problem as well.

In the center we live like a family and share everything. That loving environment supports the participants to open their minds. In the temple they can find loving kindness and there are no guns, etc. It is very different compared to the military camp. It is difficult to help these people. They need loving kindness, tolerance, and sincerity. In order to work successfully, it needs people from all fields of society to work together, because drug addiction does not only concern individuals, but is a social issue. When people from different fields of society are involved, it also creates a sense of shared responsibility.

From a personal perspective I believe that the experiences at the center also helped me to grow. Through observation and participation I have strengthened my personal beliefs and gained great merit. I also gained great happiness and satisfaction from seeing the rehabilitated 'ex-addicts' return to become fully functioning members of society.

PICHLER: What do you see as the main reasons for getting addicted to drugs?

CHAIYATHA: There are many conditions: for example friends or environment. There is the aspect of fashion and popularity and a lot of entertainment such as bars, etc. Sometimes people push others to take drugs. Bad social conditions such as living in slums, broken families, and lack of education are also problematic. Family problems could be divorce and separation or fights within the families. Some parents are not a good example to their children and don't know how to advise them. Another reason is that many people want to make money through selling drugs – even people from the government or police – and they try to get young people addicted. Even if they are rich already they want to make more money. It is important to see that there are many conditions that lead to taking drugs; it is not only one condition.

PICHLER: What do you think about the future potential of applying Buddhist ideas in responding to drug addiction? How would you envision dealing with drug issues in society?

CHAIYATHA: In my opinion, it is not only Buddhist ideas, beliefs, and traditions that can be applied to these rehabilitation programs. Anywhere where the ideals of loving kindness and compassion can be found, these principles can be applied. But spirituality, love, kindness, and compassion are just the start. It will take all levels of society, from spiritual leaders, through the medical profession, to the legal and probation services, to work together as a cohesive whole in order to meet the difficulties inherent in drug addiction.

At the center we put strong emphasis on establishing contact between the participants of the program and the community members. Instead of isolating the participants from the rest of society we should rather provide structures that enable encounter, where people can support each other and increase mutual understanding. Loving kindness and compassion can provide the basis for working with people to overcome drug addiction. Also other problems, conflicts, and crimes in society can be approached with loving kindness and compassion. We are all linked with each other and depend on one another, so we need to take good care of and support each other, even if we sometimes make mistakes. That is all part of our experience.

PICHLER: Is there something more that you would like to mention? Do you have another comment?

CHAIYATHA: When we were working with the government officials from the Department of Probation in Ubon Ratchathani in 1999, it was a different team dynamic than it is now in Amnat Charoen. Many of the government officials that were supposed to work with us as a team just didn't come. It seems like their intention of doing the program was more to have a high position in the job and to earn more money, rather than truly wanting to support the program. It makes me sad. Now, in Amnat Charoen, the teamwork is better. The team in Ubon Ratchathani is still there, but a few years ago a new center in Amnat Charoen was opened that is responsible for this area. I would like to finish by reiterating the value of good team work in this field.

PICHLER: Thank you for this interview and sharing your knowledge and experiences!